THE HEART OF CLELIA.

—BY—

ELEANOR M. INGRAM,

Author of "The Justice of Guido,"
"Two Who Learned," etc.

THEY confronted each other across the width of the palace balcony; the Princess Rosario Maria Clelia del Isoletto d'Este, cousin of the Duke Guido, and the ragged, grim-eyed boy of the people, who had just swung himself over the stone balustrade before her. Her gemmed hands pressed on either side against the wall to which she had retreated, her wide, turquoise eyes dilated, the young girl stared at the intruder, too stupefied even to cry out. And he gazed as fixedly at her.

"You do not call—good!" he said. "You are afraid? Do you know what I am going to do to you? Did you ever see me, as I lurked in the streets when you others passed by?"

He spoke with a strange, vehement rapidity and force, standing with folded arms, like some slender, classic bronze. Speechless, the princess moved her head in bewildered denial.

"No? Listen, then; I am tired of suffocation. I live down there in the gutters. How old are you? Fifteen, sixteen? I am eighteen, eighteen years of watching you others and starving for your life. For long it was all a glittering blur; six months ago, I first saw you against that background. You never saw me, you say? False, lady, false—you once looked me straight and full. And that look of yours was a splendid lash, that struck across my soul and drove it on to this. You do not understand? My father was a noble of your rank, my home is a tavern down there. Does that help you—do you now see what a wasting war of passions rages in me? Oh, I have suffered, suffered!"

Her geranium-red mouth stirred; it was easy to read the *aves* fluttering with her breath. The boy moved a step nearer.

"At first, I envied the men; the nobles gay in silks, whose very daggers flashed with jewels, who went in and out among each other with jest or menace, feud or friendship. Then I saw you. May not a rosy cloud clasping a star, as that one yonder, shine as brightly on a pool of the street as on

the clear river? It can, it does—and so your beauty shone on me! What do they call you?"

She quivered, her eyes still on his; of all her titles, she found but one word.

"Clelia," she whispered faintly.

"Clelia," the soft syllables ran over his lips. "Good, you should have no common name. Now, the end. What is there in my life that I want? What can love offer me, who would have my mate lily-handed, delicate-faced, gold of hair and gold in raiment and fragrant as a blossom? Nothing? Good, again—you, Clelia, have lashed me, Rufino, to my death. I scorn this life of mine; so, I cast it down in payment for one instant."

He was close to her before she could speak or move; stooping, he laid a hand on either shoulder, and kissed her once on the soft mouth.

"Now call your servants," he bade, and drew back to the rail, folding his arms. "I could not escape if I would."

Clelia's head sank back against the wall, her white, fringed lids fell across her eyes, to shut out his gaze. But she did not call. After some moments she began to retreat, almost gropingly, step by step along the building until she reached the doorlike window. There she paused, cast one last glance at the motionless figure, and fled within, in sudden panic.

It was sunset in Belfiore. The boy looked across the glittering mediæval city, his young face gray, and fixed his eyes on the rosy cloud in which hung the evening star.

Ten minutes passed, a quarter of an hour. Abruptly the curtain at the window swayed aside. Silently, timidly, Clelia crept across the balcony, extending a silken purse.

"Go," she urged, her voice a breath of sound.

He flushed; his first movement was of recoil, his second toward her.

"You have not called your servants, though you were free. It is a gift, then, your gold; not a bribe?"

"A gift," she assented tremulously. "I do not wish that you should suffer —go away, far away; buy what you want with this."

"Away," he repeated "Away." Suddenly he caught the purse, and thrust it into the bosom of his tattered garments. "The splendid lash," he exclaimed passionately. "I shall come back to you."

When she looked again he was gone. Only the cords of the scarlet awning trembled from his recent descent. Terrified at herself, Clelia covered her face and went in.

Late that night, between midnight and dawn, the Duke Guido of Belfiore awoke from sleep to feel the metallic chill of a steel blade touching his throat. The candles in the brackets had been extinguished, and the lofty room was densely dark.

"Lie you still, lord duke," breathed a tense young voice above him. "I go, who have nourished for years the hope of killing you. But remember this: I, your enemy, stood armed at your bedside, and spared you. Remember, for one day I will remind you of the forbearance."

The naked blade was laid across his naked throat; there was a step in the darkness. The duke started up, striking the bell beside him.

"Lights!" he commanded, as the startled attendants rushed in. "Search the room and the courts below—a man has just escaped from here. Make haste, negligent guards that you are!"

The palace flared into light and tumult. Shouting, waving torches, the searchers swarmed out. But they found nothing.

"Dear my lord, what is this?" demanded the Duchess Gemma, reaching her husband's bedside.

"A gift to me, bird of my heart," the duke soothed, himself coolly tranquil. "See, some one has given me a stiletto."

He held it up; a frail, keen weapon, with a hilt of chased silver, fitter for his white fingers than for the rough grasp of an assassin.

"This in remembrance," he mused. "I shall remember."

One may forget a great deal in two years, or—one may not. But in any case one grows. During the two years that followed, the Princess Clelia attained the age of eighteen under the nonchalant rule of her young kinswoman, the Duchess Gemma. And then, one day her sovereign and cousin made an announcement.

"You are become so fair, my Clelia, that a score of hands would pluck the lily," observed the duke to her. "I have arranged for your marriage to the Count Ferrand of Anjou, who is now on his way to Belfiore. You are content?"

"What is your pleasure is mine, *signore*," was Clelia's reply, given with the submissiveness of a gently born Italian girl.

Guido laughed and carelessly saluted her cheek.

"We have never seen him, cousin, but he is reported gallant and handsome. Make ready for your wedding; the first court marriage since my own, four years ago."

Clelia obeyed, or, rather, allowed the duchess to obey for her. She was not expected to do anything, and she did not. The preparations were set on foot at once, without her action.

"You have no heart, cousin," the duchess said, half in scorn, half in congratulation, entering the young girl's room one afternoon. "You pale beauty, you were born to be a pawn in the statecraft game; thank your saint for it."

"Yes," Clelia answered absently. "See, *signora*, those bars of pink and gold cloud over there—do they not look like a fair loom, with the evening star for a shuttle? I marvel what they are weaving."

Gemma stared at her; full-bosomed, deep-eyed, Guido's wife was a richly emotional daughter of the South.

"I do not know," she responded dryly. "Your time for clouds is over. Do you hear the trumpets at the gates? Don Ferrand is come to Belfiore."

Clelia folded her hands in her lap, trembling a little.

"Yes, *signora*." And, after an instant: "I hope he will not kiss me."

"*Santa Maria!*" ejaculated the duchess, and swept, disgusted, from the room.

Half an hour later, Clelia, gorgeously attired, her fair hair braided with pearls, was led into the great salon, to greet her betrothed.

"Signor count, pay your devoirs to my noble kinswoman," said Guido, having her beside him on the dais.

"I have laid my life at the feet of the Lady Clelia, and my heart and my soul," was the clear answer.

Clelia lifted her lashes for the first time, startled. Count Ferrand was very young, of a fine, ascetic bronze beauty, clad in scarlet velvet and gold, as became a bridegroom. His compelling dark eyes met hers, his firm lips parted in a very slight smile as he took her hand and bowed over it. The young girl staggered suddenly, the hot color running under her translucent skin like flame behind some thin, white screen.

"The Lady Clelia is a timid fawn, count," smiled Guido, amused. "Let us go in to supper; perhaps on the way she may answer you."

The courtiers smiled also, as a matter of course. Clelia curtsied profoundly to Ferrand, and suffered him to take her fingers, but she remained mute.

"Speak," the count murmured at her ear, as they paced down the hall. "Speak, princess; my heart listens for your voice."

"You know it, *signore*," she stammered faintly.

"I? How should I know what I have never heard? But now I have learned it, and am happy."

Her delicate fingers quivered in his clasp; before she could reply they were in the dining hall.

The banquet was gay, if impromptu.

"We would have put more ceremony to our welcome, had we expected this honor so soon," the duke declared. "Fair cousin, know you that this cavalier of yours was set upon by bandits in the mountains, and arrived here shorn of half his train? Not in the

"Now call your servants," he bade.

province of Belfiore did this happen, or the countryside should be swept and cleansed."

Clelia turned her wide eyes on her betrothed, but Count Ferrand was playing with the fruit on his plate and did not look up.

"Our neighbor governs ill," drawled the Duchess Gemma, filling the pause.

After the supper, they went back to the salon, and the slow, stately dances commenced. Guido opened the ball with Clelia, Count Ferrand and the duchess opposite him. Afterward, Ferrand and Clelia danced together.

"Will you marry me, princess?" asked the Anjouvien, as they bent, swaying, to the languorous music.

Amazed, her blue eyes dwelt on his dark face.

"Have I any choice?" she wondered.

Their high-held hands touched to the measure.

"Yes," he answered curtly. "Bid me, and I go from Belfiore to-morrow, nor betray your refusal to the duke. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," said Clelia.

The music swept them together.

"If you had said no," he stated, his breath on her cheek, "I should have flung myself into the river to-night."

And he meant it; she felt the conviction run through every tense fibre.

Before the evening ended, the duke had fixed the wedding day for a week ahead, no one demurring.

"Are you content?" the Duchess Gemma demanded of her young kinswoman, when they parted for the night.

"Yes, *signora,*" passively responded Clelia.

"Well, he is likable, your Anjouvien. But he moves like a wild hawk among our sleek falcons." She laughed, shrugging her shoulders. "Oh, graceful enough, and handsome enough, but not Italian. And he eats you with his eyes, you child."

Clelia curtsied.

It was true, indeed, that Ferrand of Anjou had suffered from the mountain robbers. Of all his train, there remained only four men. But he had rescued money in plenty, and could supply all things lacking. Self-possessed, rather silent, haughtier than the haughty Italians, he moved through the brilliant court.

On the third day, Clelia found herself alone with her betrothed for the first time. She was resting on a window seat in an alcove of the upper hall, when Ferrand discovered her.

"May I stay?" he asked.

"If you will," she murmured.

He folded his arms and leaned against a pillar opposite her, his gaze on her face; the informal grace of the pose was truly untamed, as Gemma had said. But it was for another reason that the attitude struck the young girl out of her calm.

"You said you would come back!" she exclaimed, almost wildly. "Why? How?"

Unmoved, he met her eyes.

"Come back, princess? I have never before been here."

"Never? Never? You never climbed my balcony, and——"

"You are unwell, princess? You forget that I am of Anjou and Provence. For whom do you take me?"

She laid her hand over her heart.

"There was a boy—two years ago—a peasant——"

"Princess!"

"He was like you, so like. He came once to my balcony, and——"

"That is twice you have spoken that phrase, *signorina.* He came to your balcony, and——"

"He kissed me," she confessed, and hid her face.

After a moment, Ferrand crossed to her side, and deliberately went on his knee, to bring their eyes level.

"You hated that insolent peasant, princess?"

She shook her head.

"You—loved him?"

Again the negative movement of the bowed golden head.

"No?" He paused, leaning nearer yet. "You love *me,* Donna Clelia? For me you are earth and heaven and all between; I find no universe outside of you, nor want one. Anjou or Belfiore, a palace or a prison, are to me but places where you are or are not. I love your beauty and your delicateness and your weakness—love you me?"

The dark eyes and the blue were very close; sighing, Clelia swayed toward him, and he drew her head to his shoulder. But he did not kiss her, perhaps still bound by convention, and they rested silently in that embrace until a step sounded down the corridor. Then Clelia sprang up and fled.

Fled, not soon enough.

"You pay your court, count?" inquired the Duke Guido's smooth accents, as he looked after the flying figure.

"Do I exceed my privilege, *signore?*" parried Ferrand. He was flushed and strangely shaken, and the face he averted was not that of a happy lover.

"A privilege is a flexible thing; per-

haps not. But do you think it kind to awaken a maiden to the unrest and pain of love?"

"*Signore*, I am her betrothed!"

"Ah, yes, I was forgetting that. Yet life is very uncertain; it might be wiser to wait until you were her husband."

Ferrand swiftly faced him.

"What may your highness mean?" he demanded.

Guido smiled at him, his white fingers playing with a pendant jewel.

"Nothing, dear count," he returned, with a caressing sweetness of inflection, and passed on down the corridor.

The Duke Guido was the most dangerous noble in Italy, and Ferrand knew it. Biting his lip, the Anjouvien restrained his first impulse of pursuit and remained looking after the other man in silence.

The days left before the marriage were days of gayety in the court. And a delightful romance was given the affair of state, Count Ferrand being so obviously and earnestly in love. No one expected emotion from Clelia, or felt surprise that she remained rather a passive spectator, than an actor in the pageant.

On the last afternoon, the Duke Guido sought his guest in the palace gardens.

"Come to my cabinet, dear count," he invited pleasantly. "I have dispatches from Anjou which may interest you."

Ferrand started, turning his falcon glance upon the other. But he followed, without question, to the little gold-and-amber room.

"Pray close the door behind you, signor count," requested the duke, sinking into the seat awaiting him, and leaning his handsome head against the cushions. "Bah, what a warm day! Tell me, how did the foolish tale start which declares Ferrand of Anjou to be fair-haired and gray-eyed, when you are as dark as I?"

Ferrand closed the door, but he did not seat himself, instead folding his arms and standing, with a certain steady watchfulness.

"I am dark, as you say, *signore*," was his reply.

"Very dark. Imagine that I have received letters from the monastery of San Giorgio del Dragone, where some fugitives from the mountain outlaws have taken refuge, claiming that Count Ferrand of Anjou is there. It is amusing to see how complete are the credentials he sends, this man; how convincing his proofs of identity."

"I brought you mine, your highness."

"Surely. But it is suggested—pray indulge these fancies—that yours might have been taken from the baggage of the count for the purposes of masquerade."

"Would such a masquerader have left alive the true Count Ferrand to spread the tale?"

"The point is good. But this youth at the monastery says that he and his companions were to be shipped to Barbary, out of the way, and only escaped by a fortunate chance."

Ferrand's breathing quickened slightly, his chest heaved under velvet and silk.

"You have been in communication with this youth, *signore?*" he asked.

"Yes," Guido assented languidly. "For several days, dear cavalier."

The room was very still. His dark lashes sweeping his cheeks, his face a mask of pale bronze, Ferrand held his attitude, without offering comment or defense. After many moments, Guido laid his hand upon the table beside him, touching one of the pretty toys strewn there, as if idly.

"I have an excellent memory for voices," he observed. "Two years ago, it happened that an assassin gained entrance to my bedside at night. An assassin? I spoke wrongly; he was not that, for he held a stiletto at my throat, and yet did not strike. But he told me that some day he might claim my forbearance in return for his. I am quite certain, signor count, that if he should speak in my hearing I would remember his voice as the one of that midnight visit, no matter how

much time had intervened. Especially if circumstances aided."

Still Ferrand did not move. Coolly interested, Guido watched him.

"Forbearance to forbearance. I believe, Count Ferrand, if this man stood before me, convicted of a crime that must be punished, a crime I could not pardon, that I would strive to spare him public disgrace. I believe, rather than have him openly arrested, tried, and executed as a criminal and impostor under the eyes of the woman he loved, I would give him—this." He suddenly extended his hand, with lying across its palm a chased silver stiletto. "I would tell him that, he being found dead, the affair should remain a court secret, so far as could be. And if he were a man of courage, knowing escape not possible, if he desired to wear to the end his borrowed character of gentleman, I believe he would accept."

There was a long pause. Twice Fer-

"Take me with you where you go."

rand seemed about to speak, and did not. His outstretched arm resting across the table, Guido waited; until the other slowly moved over and took the stiletto from his hand. Then the duke smiled, with the dazzling brilliancy that was yet so hard, the glint of sun on steel.

"Farewell, cavalier," he said.

"Farewell, your highness," Ferrand answered, and saluted him before leaving the cabinet.

In her own chamber, seated before her balcony window, Clelia was dreaming in maiden solitude when the closing of the inner door announced a visitor.

"Princess," said a smothered, vehement voice beside her. "Clelia!"

She turned, and sat frozen at sight of Ferrand, his rich dress disordered, his face drawn and burning with the fever of despair.

"Here, best," he exclaimed. "Here, where I kissed you first and last, let it end. Oh, splendid lash of your glance, I am content that it has driven me to this—to die and feel you grieve for me!"

He sank to his knee and hid his face in the folds of her gown, shaken from head to foot by his own passion.

"*Signore!*" she faltered, aghast.

"I lied to you the day past. Yes, I confess it. How could I have guessed that in Ferrand of Anjou you would recognize the wild peasant of two years ago? Then, boy, I offered my life in payment for a moment; now, man, I exact a higher price, and pay by death for this week."

"You—were—Rufino?"

"I was Rufino. Your gold, it furnished the beginning of this. I told you that I would come back. I have lived and worked for nothing else. Oh, I thought I loved you, yet not until these days did I know what love could be."

Dazed, half fainting, Clelia lay in her chair.

"The end, you said the end," she whispered, with difficulty. "Why?"

He rose and drew back, gazing down at her.

"The end? Yes; the duke knows the truth."

She moaned, covering her eyes.

"I had planned an end, not this, Clelia. I never was mad enough to conceive carrying you to the mountains, when discovery should come, or deserting you in flight. I meant to follow out our marriage, to drink deep of joy and triumph; and when my trick was exposed, I meant to kiss you as you slept and pass a dagger through your heart before sending it through my own. You would have felt no pain, no grief, slipping from sleep to death while I followed. You hate me?"

She shook her head.

"No? Clelia, Clelia, selfishness dies in me, even me, when I can wish you had said yes. For I leave you, to come no more."

She flung out one hand, but he did not take it. Drawing the silver stiletto from his bosom, he laid it in her lap.

"A meaner weapon will serve my purpose, keep you this in remembrance of me. For the arms engraved on its hilt are the arms of my house. Your duke's father hunted my father to prison and the scaffold; to save me from a like fate, my existence was concealed, and I grew up as a beggar in the gutter, abandoned and hopeless. I am Rufino di Valdi, son of that Prince Valdo Valdi whom Belfiore remembers yet."

Her faint cry was stifled as he leaned lower, placing a hand on either of her shoulders.

"Ferrand never dared kiss you, lest he betray Rufino. Now, once more, nor will you forget."

Her arms closed about his neck as their lips met; he had to unwind the clasp before he could turn to go.

But as he reached the door, some one stepped between the curtains and confronted him.

"Wait still a little, Don Rufino," advised Guido. "There is time."

The other recoiled, amazed.

"You have listened?" he speculated giddily. "You——"

"I have listened," Guido assented. "I followed you. Oh, purely from curi-

osity; there was no fear you would escape. And you have interested me very much."

Rufino passed his hand across his forehead, and stood for an instant, until calm speech again was possible. Then he made a gesture toward a toy weapon, suspended in its gold sheath from the duke's girdle.

"Lend me your dagger, my lord; mine is no longer mine. And let me pass," he said.

But Guido did not move.

"For a daring impostor, the dagger was very well," he stated. "For the Prince di Valdi, the case is different. The enmity that brought your father to the scaffold was my father's, not mine. Any time in these five years of my rule you might have appealed to me and I would have raised you from your gutter, at least. But, instead, you rushed into crime. You have played your game badly, cavalier."

"I——"

"You have left me no choice but to punish the outrage upon Count Ferrand, my ally's son. In the river below is anchored a ship, waiting for me to appoint a governor of the distant island prison of Rocca Grigia. I appoint you to that office, Don Rufino. Go there to your honorable exile and govern wisely those under your command. For the sake of your name, I shelter you; your early life shall remain secret and the world shall hear of this wild masquerade as a love freak born of Di Valdi's youth."

He turned to a table in the room, and composedly drew writing materials toward him, taking a seat. Utterly stupefied, Rufino looked on, the meaning of this slowly sinking its cooling sense into his fevered desperation. Clelia dragged herself up in her chair, watching both men.

"There are your credentials, and an order bidding the ship's master sail," said Guido, serenely passing the papers to his new governor. "Farewell, prince; the island may be dull, but it is less so than the gutter or the grave."

"My lord——"

"*Your* lord?" demanded Guido keenly.

Rufino put the papers in his vest and folded his arms, meeting the scrutiny straightly; all his inherited gentle blood tinted the color that rose over his face and neck.

"My lord, I had no right to hope this. I will be a true officer to you."

"I accept the promise," Guido answered, and motioned him to go.

But as Rufino turned, Clelia rose and flung her arms about him.

"Take me! Rufino, Ferrand, what name you will—but take me!"

The clear cry shattered the hush to crystalline echoes. Involuntarily, Rufino pressed her to him, before striving to put her away.

"Clelia, princess, forgive me this. I loved you."

"Take me with you where you go."

"I go into exile, to a bare rock in the Mediterranean."

"With you, let me be with you." Her soft arms locked tighter as he struggled to loosen their clasp. "A rock, a desert, but with you."

"Have I not wronged you enough!" he gasped, beads of suffering starting to his forehead.

"Never wrong until now. Take me with you. Am I so strong, so brave that I can live without love? Take me or I die."

"Clelia"—he averted his face from the flower-like one so near—"you will forget."

"Never."

"Clelia——"

"I love you."

Rufino cast a glance toward the duke, who had half arisen and was regarding the two with a strange, cynical wonder and amusement; then brought his eyes back to those of the girl.

"You, so fair and tender, Clelia, you bid me take you from a court to a prison?"

"With you!"

"To loneliness, exile, hopeless of relief?"

"With you, let me be with you. You are my court, my home, my hope. Where you go, let me go also."

With a passionate cry of exultation, he caught her to him.

"Mine, then, mine! My lord, we go—— I take my own to your ship."

His young strength swept the girl into his arms and bore her easily from the room. Her head on her lover's shoulder, her face a white glory turned to his, they vanished.

Half an hour later, there was the rustle of trailing robes, and the Duchess Gemma came to where Guido still sat.

"Where is Clelia, dear my lord?" she asked.

"She has fled with her betrothed, Rufino di Valdi, bird of my heart. You called him Count Ferrand."

"Fled?" Gemma cried. "Where?"

Guido drew her down beside him, his cool, laughing black eyes meeting hers.

"To Rocca Grigia. Never mind, one can pardon as well as punish; I think six months from now the Prince and Princess di Valdi will be recalled to Belfiore. And I will have restored an old name to the city, making for myself a loyal subject of its owner. Am I a wise diplomat, *carissima?*"

But Gemma was marveling at something else.

"Then Clelia *could* love," she wondered.

"Oh, yes," returned Guido. "Clelia could love."

TWO CUPIDS.

A GLAD-EYED god with radiant wings:
The sky is blue; and Nature sings
Of perfect love that is to be,
A world that's gained for thee and me.

A sad-eyed god with drooping wings:
The sky is gray, and memory brings
A hopeless love that must not be,
A world that's lost to thee and me.

STELLA LEERBURGER.